

EXODUS 32:1-14

PSALM 106:1-6, 19-23

PHILIPPIANS 4:1-9

MATTHEW 22:1-14

Twentieth Sunday after Pentecost; Twenty Eighth Sunday in Ordinary Time
October 15, 2023; Year A

(The preached portion of the sermon is in bold.)

Anxiety Ridden!

One of my childhood joys was reading the monthly edition of *Mad Magazine*, my brother having a subscription to this sarcastic parody of anything current, nothing off limits. With every issue came the publication's mascot, one Alfred E. Neuman, with his motto that first appeared in November 1954, "What, me worry?" As we continue to read Paul's challenging epistle musings from the cramped confines of his jail cell in Philippi, the apostle admonishes his Philippian reader then, and all of us now, including what I consider a capstone statement in the text that "the Lord is near. Do not be anxious about anything! Rather, bring up all your requests to God in your prayers and petitions, along with giving thanks. Then the peace of God that exceeds all understanding will keep your hearts and minds safe in Christ Jesus." Really! Seriously! We read these words against the backdrop of a world in conflict, if not at war, the visuals from this past week in Israel shocking our senses even when compared to the horrific images that have historically horrified us, though over time have seemingly managed to unfortunately numb our senses because of their commonplace nature, random as these planned attacks can be. "Don't be anxious!" Who's fooling who? Anxiety abounds! Only the desensitized or delusional, the emotionless, the jaded, or the blissfully unaware would not be anxious, at least to some degree. If the Lord is near in these moments, then we have a very serious problem as persons of faith. How near is near?

Frankly, this sermon comes under the heading of topics on which I would rather not preach, themes I would rather avoid or ignore. But preach amidst the vortex of chaos, the worst evil that seemingly non-human beings can inflict upon another, no matter the level of frustration and anger, comes with the pastoral and prophetic territory. Naming this demonic struggle, I must preach it this morning. Negligence is unacceptable. I cannot and will not homiletically hide from this atrocity. We must turn aside and see this ugly sight with all its ghoulish horror, anything but a Halloween scary movie! The question before us is "how can we be a non-anxious presence in the world when the world seems to be going to hell in the proverbial

handbasket?” Once again, theodicy, the role of God in our lives, in the world, and in the universe, the presence of God in the midst of evil and suffering, rises to the surface, is at the forefront of our theological inquiry and the daily living of our hopefully and wistfully peaceable lives. As Luther once said in the crucible of his life, certainly no crucible for me here, “Here I stand! I can do no other!” And considering the sobering situation gaining global attention front and center before us, as we should do as a faith community, we are off and running.

As always context helps us understand the real time setting in which the biblical writer’s audience was living, the graphic realities these first century congregants were experiencing, in this case the church at Philippi to whom Paul was addressing his concerns. Despite their deepest faithfulness as followers of the way of Christ Jesus, every member of any congregation in the early Church knew they were societally suspect, vulnerably compromised, heavily at risk, the prospect of terror and torture, persecution, and, of course, even martyrdom, always a distinct and ever-present possibility. Like walking and chewing gum it is not only possible, but more than probable, to be faithful and anxious and all at the same time. One does not have to choose. These dilemmas and dynamics do not have to be, and are rarely, either/or. Faith and doubt, security and anxiety, good and evil, are both/and in the big scheme of things, in the multifaceted circumstances and situations ordering our lives. Most scenarios confronting our daily pursuits are complex, if not complicated, and include a mixture of what appear to be polarities, disassociated, disconnected, dichotomies. Paul, as was the case with every church to which he composed the concerns and celebrations that were on his mind, laced with his seemingly random theological thoughts, was writing to a people often traumatized as they lived on the edge, their daily existence a grind revealing the haunting PTSD that comes with being the hated and the hunted. Their sensibilities were suffocated at every level with an overwhelming claustrophobic oppressiveness, sensations creating a smothering, stifling, internal anxiety and insecurity, even if tempered with a false sense of security, the solace of their belief, assuaged by their strong faith, surrounded on all sides by those who would seek to do them harm, those they refused to call enemies because of their humility and graciously loving passive principles, but knowing these were adversaries, nonetheless. Every encounter could be their last, not knowing which outsiders they could trust, a knock on the door sending a shivering chill up the spine, causing a lump in the throat, a wave of anxious breathing palpable in every labored breath in and breath out. Christianity was no cakewalk, no walk in the park, but demanded a commitment to discipleship requiring the taking up of a cross, figuratively and literally, excruciating death a very real concern with every move they made.

Anxiety seems to be the road we are often forced to travel in these days of escalating global conflict, no matter which fork we take, myriad crises seeming to consume this planet and its people. We have no idea where the Yellow Brick Road is leading! Nothing new under the sun here! My take is that fear is the engine that drives the motivation of so much of our

machinations as a human species, so much of our behavior reactionary to a seemingly endless supply, unlimited variations of angst and dis-ease that trouble our very anxiety ridden minds, poking at our tormented souls, dashing our spirits. From the smallest of everyday challenges that confront us in our daily living to the massive newsworthy shocks that shake our foundations to the core, alter our equilibrium, and take us off balance as we navigate and negotiate our reality. What would it be like to hear a sermon declaring that peace in the Middle or Near East had been achieved, that detente had become an overwhelming success between blood lust, bloodthirsty, Russia and a victimized Ukraine, that the African continent had created peace treaty alliances, that China and Iran, and Russia, had given up their thirst for power and domination, that Democrats and Republicans found pathways forward that unified a very divided and unfortunately often hostile country, many of its citizens hellbent on its demise and destruction, demanding civil war and calling for destructive sectarian ideologies and practices to be the new normal in what could become an undemocratic society? What if Christians, Jews, and Muslims begin to universally model interfaith relations, be of one loving mind? What would that be like? What if? I long to preach such imaginatively promising proclamations, hopes and dreams fulfilled revealing God's realm on earth, mirroring the prophet Isaiah's peaceful imagery in which the lamb and the lion lie down together in harmony, Israelis and Palestinians for the most glaring example among many today, as we pray for both, support both, knowing that the Palestinians have long been victimized as a homeless people, given the short end of the stick, short shrift indeed in their longing for statehood. Oh, how we desire in our hearts and minds that the child would delightfully and safely play over the den of the viper, that we would study war no more and beat our swords into plowshares, all former adversaries now coexisting peacefully among one another as truly united nations, that nothing brings harm to God's holy mountain. Instead, whatever prophet resides within me, will not allow me to avoid or ignore the agonizing discord that threatens our very survival. I mean, is climate change alone not enough to get our attention and draw humanity together to fight a good fight, a worthy cause releasing our need to battle someone or something?

Once again life's proverbial slings and arrows cause us to ponder the presence of God in the world, to consider God's attentiveness to our collective disasters, so many of our own making. We understand the brutality of nature that destroys its own beauty. After all, it is the nature of nature to be nature. We get it! To a certain degree we understand diseases and illnesses that have the dreadful capacity, the deathly ability to randomly kill, slaying both the good and bad, the evil and the innocent. We call it biology. We get it! What we do not understand, what we will never get, is the seemingly unlimited demonic capacity that one human being can unleash, can inflict, on another, the ability to disregard the one being targeted, attacked without provocation as something other than human while actually and transparently proving the opposite. We are known by our deeds. Our motives always reveal our true self. For peace-loving and peace-striving people, people of grace and mercy and

love, we are simply at a loss for the kinds of things that history has painfully and poignantly revealed, now adding another horrific chapter to a story evidently without end. In the Foreword to R. Page Fulgham's recent book on theodicy, the role of God in creation, one of my college religion professors, Professor Emeritus of Religious Studies at Mercer University, Colin Harris puts all our conundrums into perspective. Harris observes, "The question of why there is evil in an otherwise good world has perplexed the human family for as long as we have had a record of life's experiences. From the ancient saga of the biblical Job through the many tragedies of history, both of natural and human design, to the Holocaust of recent history and the deadly Covid-19 global pandemic, the question of how and why such things happen is constantly before us. Smaller-scale and more personal experiences of suffering intensify the question, and faith traditions continue to respond as helpfully as possible to its many layers."¹ Harris' opinions provide the stark reminder that we have many, many, many, questions, but answers have we little, answers being far and few amidst our pained curiosities when life deals us a severe blow. Fulgham asks the question that is close to home in times like these, "The big and pertinent questions at hand are these: Why is there evil? What is the origin of evil? Or is there no origin, *per se*, and is it just endemic to the human situation? If there were no human forms on the planet, and only animals, plants, and microbes, would there still be evil? Is evil just the absence of good, as St. Augustine suggests? Given evil, why is there so much evil in the world? Could we have evolved and developed as humans without the depth of evil—I dare say any—that humans experience?"² Yes, these are the types of questions that are vainly searching for answers, satisfactory conclusions that seem beyond our ability to even begin to grasp, to understand or mitigate.

Surely, the apostle Paul was cognizant of these realities, knowing these curious questions about Providence well, God's supposed omnipotence, omniscience, omnipresence, all measured against the backdrop of the current state of affairs he and his congregations experienced, witnessing firsthand. Yes, even as we acknowledge the limited knowledge he possessed in his prescientific world, surely, he must have sometimes reflected on these apparent inconsistencies we now accept as universal realities understood as common wisdom. Even so, Paul understood evil, the former Pharisee knew evil and suffering and knew it well, up close and personal, because he had caused a lot of it, once willingly participated in its rage back in the day in his former radically murderous, terrorist, jihadist, crusade, his religious zealotry driving his motivation, not tempered with any mercy in the least. Yes, Paul converted, dramatically so, and switched teams, changed sides as if in an instant! There is always hope for the human creature, that change, evolution, is possible, an ever-present hope and stay. Imagine a member of Hamas suddenly shifting allegiance, deciding to join forces with the Israelis and fight against his own! Probably not going to

¹R. Page Fulgham, *Evil and the Garden of Good: Exploring the Mystery of Suffering* (Macon, GA: Smyth and Helwys Publishing, Inc., 2023), Foreword.

²*Ibid.*, 3.

happen. What happened in Paul's life appears to be a one-off, an outlier, not one of one but certainly close to it, almost an exception to an unwritten rule. **Human beings tend to get entrenched in whatever narrative drives their person, dominates their being, obsessively consuming them, all of it fueling their behavior whether it be good or bad, loving or evil. Religion seems to be a fertile incubator, breeding hatred in the worst forms of hostility. The reasons for the current crisis in the Middle or Near East are many, a multifaceted complexity revealing a maze of confusion breeding conflict. There is no justification but a whole lot of explanation! None of the behavior exhibited by HAMAS, however, evil proudly paraded on display for the world to see, none of it is justified, but we all know the decades, the centuries, of tension that has consumed this part of the world, explanations abounding.** In a letter from the Executive Committee of the Board of Directors and the staff of the Alliance of Baptists, an ecumenical partner of the United Church of Christ, the reminder is offered, that "we also know that given the particular intensity of the conflict this week, the world is now watching and many people are just now learning about many of the potent issues driving this war. Alongside the physical violence, there is also a war of information, with many forces fighting to control the narrative. In this context it is tempting to rush to narrow, shallow, and limited conclusions in which we believe our only option is to stingily allocate our moral budgets. We should resist this temptation. And instead we should seek resources to help us understand the roots of this conflict and its ongoing and dynamic nature, as well as rely upon and develop our own theological and moral resources that help us expand our capacity to be compassionate, imaginative, and ultimately constructive . . . Fortunately for those of us who are a part of the Alliance, we have long cared about the conditions of Palestine and Israel and the particular plight of Palestinians as they struggle for freedom. Last year, the Alliance joined other denominations and human rights groups in naming the apartheid conditions enacted upon the Palestinian people by the State of Israel. Informed by friends on the ground, we have sought to end these conditions as a way of preempting further violence so that all in the region are free to have life and life more abundantly. . . As followers of the Prince of Peace, we are in a tradition that mandates that we work for peace throughout the world. We also note that true peace must be accompanied by justice. That mandate is no different today. . ."

Innocent Palestinians are not only at risk, but are being annihilated by targeted but seemingly indiscriminate Israeli bombs, the bodies of victims conveniently hidden in the rubble. Violence only and always begets violence, an endless vicious cycle of epic proportions, hostilities only exacerbated with every salvo of guns, missiles, and bombs, every implement of war that has evolved since the days of rock throwing and spear tossing. And yet we know and, yes condone, that Israel has to respond, reactionary behavior understood in every way. The beat goes on! History has shown, as do our present circumstances, situations not beyond human control, however, do not seem to even remotely have an off ramp, an off switch, a way to disengage and dismount, to get off the churning and turning gerbil wheel that is anything but a wheel of fortune.

I close with a letter to all of us from Franz Rigert, our Wisconsin Conference minister, compassionate and sobering words indeed.

Dear friends,

Yesterday morning, I attended an interfaith breakfast in Milwaukee. Jewish, Muslim and Christian friends sat together and shared deep sorrow for all the people of the Holy Land. We acknowledged the raw emotions so many of us feel following the horrific Hamas attacks, the hostage taking, the ruthless killing of innocent people, and the ensuing military buildup and declaration of war.

Leaders of the three Abrahamic religions humbly acknowledged this was a moment of sighs too deep for words. And so, we shared the bond of lamentation – profound sadness for such brutal destruction, death, and devastation to Palestinians and Israelis alike. So much anger turned to rage. So much resentment turned to revenge. So much hopelessness in the very land of Isaac, Ishmael and Jesus.

We wondered what to say to the people of our respective faith traditions, many of whom have family or friends in the Holy Land. At times, it seems, we need to sit with the Psalmist's prayers of lamentation:

Out of the depths I cry to you, O Lord; Lord, hear my voice. (Ps. 130:1)

Why, O Lord, do you stand far off? Why do you hide yourself in the times of trouble? (Ps. 10:1)

My soul is in deep anguish. How long, O Lord, how long? (Ps. 6:3)

This doesn't feel like the right time to weigh in on the complicated economic, religious and geopolitical issues that have contributed to this long and intractable conflict. The idea of a two-state solution, while once a hoped-for possibility, seems light-years away. Perhaps it is best at this moment to acknowledge that the actions of any militia or government may reflect the views of some, but surely not all, of their people. Many Israelis and many Palestinians refuse to hold extreme positions, and instead pray for a spirit of compromise that could lead to a respectful and peaceful coexistence.

This feels like a time to mourn together, and to find solidarity and solace in prayers for all who anguish.

This feels like a time to advocate not for one side or the other, but for the humanitarian relief of all who have suffered greatly and are in critical need of food, water, shelter and security.

This feels like a time to acknowledge that although there are no easy solutions, there are good and faithful Palestinians and Israelis who long for the day when tolerance, peace and neighborly love will be the way of life in the Holy Land.

So where is God in all of this? The Rev. Seth Ethan Carey, my sister Gretchen's gifted pastor at First Congregational UCC in Glen Ellyn, Illinois, wrote this:

"God is amidst the rubble in both Israel and Palestine; God is there cradling the innocent children caught in the crossfire; God dwells with the hostages that are paraded through the streets, keeping a spark of hope alive in them; God abides in Jewish, Muslim and Christian houses of prayer, wherever people cry out for peace."

Shalom. As-salaam Alaikum. Peace be upon you.

The Rev. Franz Rigert
Conference Minister

The apostle Paul was not naïve, out of touch with reality. He did not live in an isolationist vacuum, living in a world of let's pretend, a world of make believe, pondering and pandering false hope, "safe and secure from all alarms" as the song sings. Paul was in a prison, not a bunker, and knew that his fate would one day be sealed, a martyred victim for the cause of Christ. And yet, even so, and still, he wrote, preached when he could, advocating that the flock, and no doubt the flocks, in his care, not be anxious, yes, even as he proclaimed Christ crucified and raised, advocating for hospitable welcome and inclusion, and set the course that would continue to evolve as an ecclesial expression of faith, giving the foundation, the very moorings of the Church that has stood the test of time, good and bad and sometimes ugly, even unto this day. Today, continuing as so much more than a mere remnant, but a very real, vibrant and vital, relational and relevant, part of the larger Church, all Christians trying to find their way, navigating the polarities of and in a very cruel world, we offer our humble prayers for peace, yes thoughts and prayers the best, the most, we can do on a Sunday morning as the local gathered church, the beloved faith community assembling as one here in Eagle River, Wisconsin, a congregation committed to peace and justice for all, Israel and Palestine, and every other nation of people, including the likes of you and me.

In the name of the One who creates, redeems, and sustains and longs for us humans to figure it out, learn to live together in harmony and unity, and make a lasting peace. May it be so! Amen and amen.

